

FIREFIGHTING THROUGH THE AGES

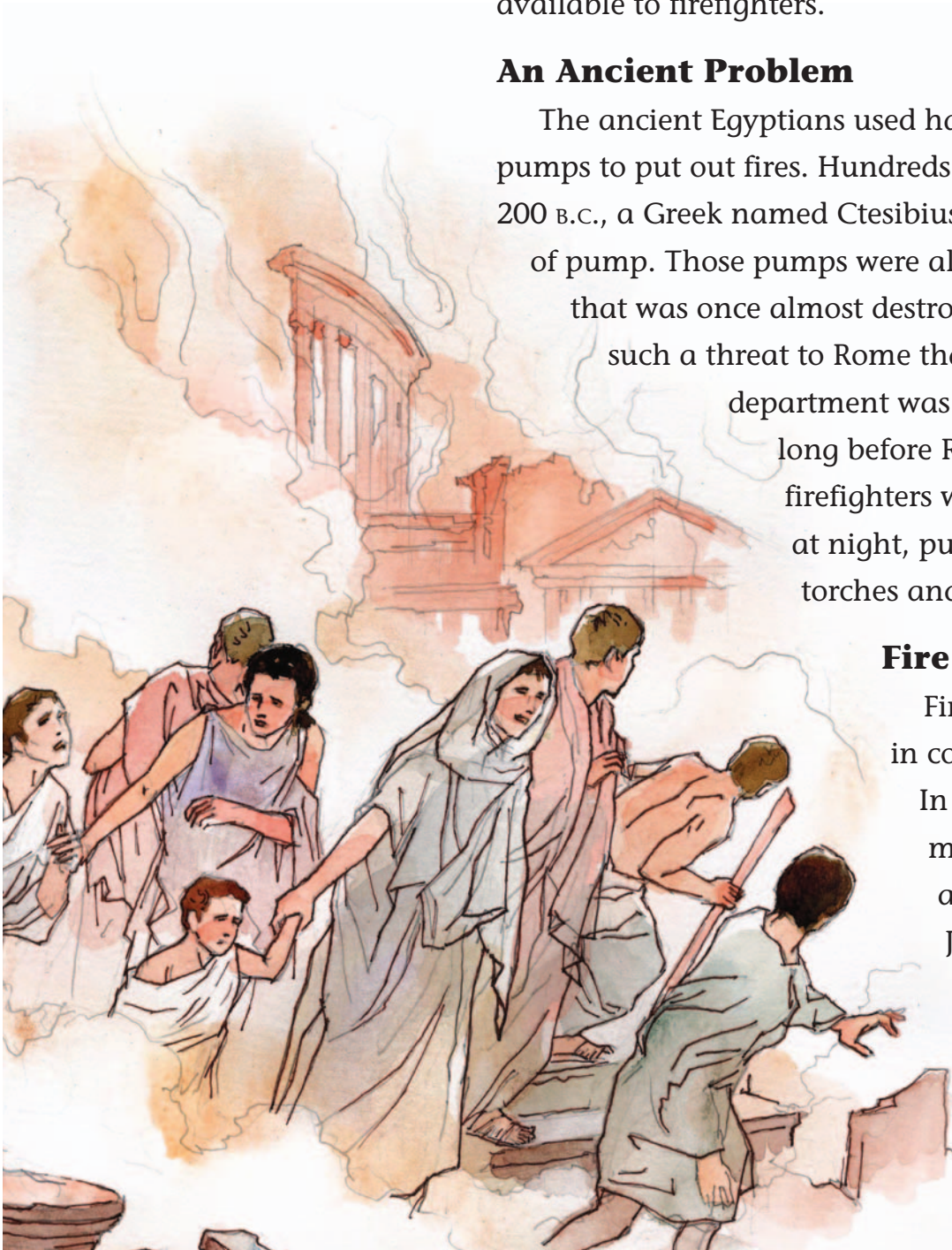
How would you feel if your house was on fire and firefighters arrived with some buckets? A long time ago, if you were lucky, they might also have hand-operated pumps that could squirt a few gallons of water at a time. Throughout much of history, those were the only tools available to firefighters.

An Ancient Problem

The ancient Egyptians used hand-operated wooden pumps to put out fires. Hundreds of years later, in 200 B.C., a Greek named Ctesibius invented a new kind of pump. Those pumps were also used in Rome, a city that was once almost destroyed by fire. Fire was such a threat to Rome that the world's first fire department was formed there. It wasn't long before Rome had thousands of firefighters who patrolled the streets at night, putting out fires lit by torches and oil lamps.

Fire in the Colonies

Fire was a big problem in colonial America, too. In 1608, fire destroyed most of the lodgings and supplies of the Jamestown colony. Fire was such a problem in Boston that wooden chimneys and thatched roofs were outlawed in 1631.



(Thatch is a long, grasslike plant used to cover roofs.) Embers floated up from chimneys, landed on thatched roofs, and started fires that quickly spread out of control. Colonists tried to put out the fires using “bucket brigades”—lines of people who passed buckets of water from a well to the person closest to the fire. But buckets of water did little to extinguish most fires; to keep fires from spreading, colonists often used axes to tear down surrounding buildings.

New Technology for a New Nation

Wheel-mounted hand pumpers were brought to America from England in the early 1700s. Several strong men were needed to operate the pumps, and bucket brigades were needed to fill the pumps.

Fire technology continued to improve, and by the late 1800s, steam-driven fire pumps were widely used in Europe and America. Hand pumping was no longer necessary, but the pumps still had to be wheeled to fires or pulled by horses. This changed in the early 1900s with the invention of the gasoline engine. Gas-powered fire trucks with pumps could arrive quickly at the scene of a fire, carrying large amounts of heavy equipment. Firefighting was never the same again. We can be thankful for that!

Adapted from an article by Christine Graf
Illustrated by Wenhai Ma

Fun Fact:

Dalmations were originally chosen as fire dogs because they formed a strong bond with the horses used to pull pumps. They guarded the valuable horses and kept them company in the station. At the sound of the station bell, the dogs would wake the horses and follow the firefighters to the scene.



Timeline of Technology

2000 B.C. Ancient Egyptians use hand-operated pumps.



200 B.C. Ctesibius, a Greek inventor, creates a new basic hand pump.

A.D. 100 Rome forms the first fire department consisting of 7,000 firefighters.

1600s American colonists use bucket brigades to fight fires.

1700s Wheel-mounted hand pumpers were brought to America from England.

Late 1800s Steam-driven fire pumps pulled by horses were widely used in the U.S. and Europe.



Early 1900s Gas-powered fire trucks with pumps helped firefighters save more lives.